

# Australian maritime union isolates and betrays Portland seamen

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The Maritime Union of Australia, working with the Labor Party and several federal cross-bench senators, has used the sacking of 38 seafarers by transnational mining company Alcoa to launch a reactionary, nationalist campaign directed against foreign shipping workers.

On January 13, company thugs boarded the MV Portland, which workers had occupied for two months, and replaced them with an overseas crew. The MUA had demanded reinstatement and Australian-manned crews for domestic shipping—in line with the union’s nationalist perspective.

The union’s demagoguery about “defending Australian jobs” is an utter fraud aimed at obscuring its own role in enforcing the ever-deeper cuts to jobs, wages and conditions demanded by the major port and shipping companies.

In late October, the federal Liberal-National government granted Alcoa a “temporary coastal license,” allowing it to use international shipping companies and crews to transport goods between Australian-based ports. Under the country’s cabotage laws, ships trading between domestic ports are currently required to be Australian-operated and crewed unless receiving a temporary exemption.

In early November, Alcoa announced that it was planning to decommission the MV Portland, which transported alumina from Western Australia to Alcoa’s smelter in Portland, Victoria for 27 years. The ship had been due for a statutory dry-dock in mid-2017. The ship’s 38 crew members were told that they would be sacked after they had sailed the vessel to Singapore.

Replacing the crew with overseas workers and shipping operators is expected to save the company more than \$6 million a year. According to one estimate, crew members from the Philippines are to be paid as little as \$207 a week.

On November 14, Portland workers occupied the ship,

refusing to leave port. The union immediately sought to isolate them, and direct their anger into the nationalist dead-end of hostility to foreign shipping lines and crews.

The real enemy, however, is big business—whether Australian or foreign-owed—which is desperately seeking to boost profits by slashing jobs and conditions. Alcoa, like all the major mining corporations, has been hit by the collapse of the mining boom in Australia and the deepening global economic slump. At the beginning of November, Alcoa also announced that it was “idling” three of its smelters in the United States. Last Friday, Moody’s rating agency warned of a possible downgrade to the company’s credit rating.

More broadly, the international shipping industry has been sharply contracting under the impact of falling trade. One indicator is the decline of the Baltic Dry Index—which measures the cost of moving dry raw materials by sea—to 354 points, its lowest level since January 1985. Prior to the 2008 financial crisis, the index reached peaks of 11,000 points.

George Logothetis, the head of international shipping line Libra Group, told the World Economic Forum in Davos this month that the shipping industry’s crisis had reached “Armageddon level.” Shipping companies are reportedly selling off ships to ensure their liquidity.

With shipping and related industries around the world under pressure, companies are demanding stepped-up attacks on workers everywhere. This agenda has provoked struggles by shipping and port workers, including a port strike in Oakland, California at the beginning of 2015 and strikes by Korean shipbuilders late last year.

The MUA, however, is bitterly hostile to any attempt to unify workers in Australia with their counterparts internationally in a common struggle against the shipping and port magnates to defend jobs, wages and conditions. Instead, the union functions as an industrial police force of the port and shipping companies. It kept the Portland

workers isolated, leaving them vulnerable to Alcoa's attacks, and subordinated their struggle to the industrial courts.

In late November, the Fair Work Commission, Australia's federal industrial tribunal, ordered the workers to leave the ship. The court, which functions as a pro-business instrument of the major corporations, was established by the Gillard Labor government in 2009 with the support of the unions.

When the workers defied the ruling, the MUA directed them into futile court appeals. The union launched an unsuccessful action in the Federal Court to have Alcoa's "temporary coastal license overturned."

On January 13, at 1 a.m., 30 security personnel hired by Alcoa raided the vessel, hauling off the five workers who were on board at the time. A replacement crew was immediately installed and the ship sent to Singapore. MUA officials, having done nothing to prevent the attack, escalated their nationalist campaign.

At a rally in Portland on Monday of about 300 people, officials from the MUA and a number of other unions assembled behind a banner declaring, "Our Coast. Our Jobs. Our Future."

MUA national secretary Paddy Crumlin declared: "The ability of a profitable foreign company to replace 40 Australian workers with unregulated, developing world labour should be a concern for every single working man and woman in this country."

Crumlin said that the sackings violated the right of workers "to work in their own country." Underscoring the xenophobia of its campaign, the union demanded to know which visas were provided to the replacement crew, and whether they were subjected to "criminal and security checks."

Indicating the real motive of the union campaign, Crumlin stated: "There was a time when business, government and workers represented by their unions would work together in a mutually beneficial manner." In other words, the union is entirely committed to the agenda of stepped-up "productivity" and "efficiency"—its only concern is to maintain its position as enforcers for the company and the government.

Crumlin's perspective was embodied in a "Coastal Trading—Industry Discussion" forum in Melbourne last Friday, which brought together the MUA's senior officials, leading representatives of the Greens, Labor and three cross-bench federal senators, along with the major shipping associations.

The discussion was chaired by Greg Smith, former Fair

Work deputy commissioner. The MUA restated its calls for Australian shipping companies to be provided with financial incentives.

Labor, which opposes legislation introduced by the government to effectively abolish cabotage restrictions, has backed the MUA's campaign. Last week, Labor leader Bill Shorten declared: "I think it's a disgrace that we are seeing, even on the Australian coastline, fewer Australian flag ships."

Shorten, a former national secretary of the Australian Workers Union, and a senior minister in the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments, is directly responsible for the destruction of thousands of jobs. He hastened to add that he was opposed to "mindless militancy" and "illegality." His comments were duly posted on the MUA's website.

The union's promotion of xenophobia and racism goes hand in hand with its decades-long collaboration with the major shipping and port companies at the expense of workers' jobs and conditions. When Hutchison Ports sacked 97 workers in Sydney and Brisbane by text message last August, the MUA responded by declaring that it was because the company is Hong Kong-based.

While joining with Shorten and other Labor Party figures in denouncing Hutchison's move as "un-Australian," the MUA did everything it could to isolate the workers and entered into closed-door negotiations. In November, it struck a deal with Hutchison for 65 redundancies, a boost to casualisation and other pro-company "reforms."

The shipping industry is inherently international in character. As a result, any struggle to defend jobs and conditions necessarily requires a turn to workers not only in Australia but around the world and a complete break with the trade unions and their nationalist demagoguery.



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